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## ECCLESIASTES CONSIDERED PSYCHOLOGICALLY

The question to be discussed in this paper is: What must have been the state of mind of the writer of Ecclesiastes, and how can we account for it? In the "Ideal Biography" of Plumptre (Cambridge Bible Series), the possible life-history which lies back of this work is well set forth. I take a different point of view, considering the mistakes of thought and sins of choice which, from the stand-point of Christian ethics, were the real cause of Koheleth's ("The Preacher's") disappointment. These, after all, are the more important; for outward circumstances and the influence of other writers may determine the form, but not the essential character of such experience. This is not an attempt to read backward into Ecclesiastes the high morality of the New Testament. In interpretation of the Old Testament, two things are to be done. First, to put ourselves, as far as possible, in the historical position and intellectual atmosphere of the author, laying aside our preconceptions and associations of thought, and to discover what his words meant *in his mind*. And, then, to interpret the history, person or idea, thus set before us, in the light of the fuller revelation of Christ. Not to do this is to persist in walking in the twilight, after the day has dawned. This article assumes that the first step has been taken, and attempts an interpretation not of what Koheleth says, but of Koheleth himself judged according to the "secret of Jesus." Not until this has been done, can his revelation of his inner life in the book of Ecclesiastes yield instruction in moral and religious truth; and when so treated, there is scarce a life in Bible history more suggestive, especially in our time and country, with its enormous wealth and its consequent temptation to seek satisfaction where Koheleth sought.

Our starting-point is the *normal state of man*, which, according to Christianity, is the life of faith, the state in which *man's intellect* finds the solution of all problems in an all-wise and all-loving Creator; his *feelings* find satisfaction and peace in God's glory and goodness, revealed in His gifts and personal presence; and his *will* has made its supreme choice to serve God in God's way. This is not Koheleth's state at the open-

ing of that soul experience which he has recorded. How had he lost the practical faith of his fathers and of his own childhood? The answer is found in the very nature of the problem he set before himself. We see it in the catchwords, "profit," "good," "vanity." He asks: "What shall man live for? What can he gain by all his labor?"

Now in the very fact that this is the question he asks, lies the source of all his temptation. It implies that the chief end of man's life is his own enjoyment, which is a lie. Of course, every person is an end in himself, never merely a means to some other end. But if one person is an end, the thousand millions of mankind are a billion times as important an end. In seeking first his own pleasure he exalts the billionth part of the true purpose into the whole, complaining that palaces, parks and music do not satisfy him, while thousands go in rags that he may loll in luxury. Nay more, forgetting that God alone is worthy of good, that His good is infinitely more important than any creature's, he assumed that the universe existed for himself. He forgot the law—taught in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the Christian—without which the universe would be a chaos of conflicting, selfish wills; the command, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," and, since the good of a Creator must rest in the perfection of His creation, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," i. e., recognize and seek the good of every created person as of equal importance with thine own. Thus only can there be harmony in the universe, none sacrificed to another, all blessed. But Koheleth exalted his own good till it filled his horizon. Sin always precedes doubt.

*The second mistake* naturally followed. Assuming that he was to seek his own good, he asked, What is my good? Beginning in error, inevitably he went astray. He found study, mirth, wine, possessions, luxury, whatever his eyes desired, all, vanity! Of course; for the soul gains not by getting. Made in the Creator's image, which very name implies eternal forth-putting, man finds his life only when he loseth it. This led to a *third mistake*, a false external idea of good as if it were something to be kept and counted, a profit, a surplus. But pleasure vanishes when you try to measure it. To seek a "surplus" is folly, implying that man's life reaches an end and is balanced like a ledger. What profit for all man's labor? Why, in *himself, in every moment that he*

*labors.* Koheleth soon saw this error—his correcting it was his first step back toward the light—saying, “It is good and comely for one to eat and to drink and enjoy the good of all his labor.”

These three mistakes are the *cause*, though circumstances may have been the *occasion*, of Koheleth's mood. He had every means of luxury. His age gave only examples of unbridled indulgence. Israel's religion had lost the vivid sense of God's historical providence, and formalism prevailed. In the nation's decay, the advancement of the theocratic monarchy had ceased to be the satisfying life-purpose which it had been to David. Wide intercourse with foreign nations tended to syncretism in religion and philosophy. The time was one of vice, cruelty and oppression, of espionage and servility.

With such exaggerated desire for personal happiness, and under such influences, no wonder Koheleth doubted and despaired. As long as men regarded the earth as the center of the universe, the planets were wanderers in inextricable disorder. So to him whose centre is self, there is only succession of phenomena, profitless toil.

Goethe says that the most common cause of suicide is such loss of sympathy with the recurring cycles of life and nature, and tells of an Englishman who killed himself because he was tired of dressing and undressing; of a gardener who exclaimed, in vexation, “Must I always see the clouds drifting from west to east?” So when Koheleth moans that all is wearisome repetition and vanity, it is as true as gospel, the logical conclusion of a selfish life.

But Koheleth was not hopelessly selfish. Holding still his faith in God, though he had lost its relation to his life, he gradually worked his way to the light. He learned to see in the round of phenomena, God's order and man's opportunity, hard though it be to seize in time. His heart, though not yet satisfied, knew that it *ought to be* satisfied in the enjoyment of God's gifts and in doing good. And this thought led him out of himself, to see the miseries of the world, God's judgment of the wicked delayed and future retribution doubtful, the earth full of oppressed and none to comfort. Short-lived popularity, prosperity never unaccompanied by corroding care, childless misers toiling for riches they must leave. So everywhere was vanity! But how much higher this *pity and unsatisfied sense* of justice than *selfish discontent*! Rising

above his pessimism, Koheleth, in the style of a Hebrew sage, paints the advantages of friendship, wisdom, God-fearing contentment, etc., sometimes falling back into despair, but less and less frequently. This change of the question from "What profit is there?" to, "What is wise and right?" marks the waning power of temptation, as his true-self gains the mastery. A great step was taken when he found that God had made man upright and man had sought out many inventions. Then some, at least, of the vanity of the world is *man's work, not God's!* But the turning point was when the intuition of reason rose above the cavils of the perplexed understanding. As Job exclaimed, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," Koheleth cried, "I *know* that it shall be well with them that fear God."

We who, with all the light of Christ's revelation, often stand in anguish before the mysteries and sorrows of life, need not wonder that after the triumph of faith the clouds returned. The very glory of that which we know *is*, intensifies the bitterness of that *which seems to be*. So Koheleth felt. "One event to righteous and wicked in life; and in death, what but cessation of thought and joy, the memory of the dead surviving them not!" But, though he still felt the temptation, it could no longer overpower him; for he now sought what was right, not what was pleasing. He has given the conclusion in which his soul took refuge in chapter 11. "Storms will come. But the control of the seasons is with God. We know not his works; but seed-time and harvest shall not cease. So in the morning sow thy seed." It is essentially the same teaching as Peter gives, "Casting all your care on Him who careth for you." Do your duty and leave *results* with God. Mysteries remain, but do not appall. To be sure he closes by describing old age and death; but though death is still mysterious night, in the poet's description, the closing hours of life glow with all the splendors of sunset.\* Before this could be, death must have lost its bitterness. "The soul shall return to God who gave it."

\* If there is poetry which produces its effect not by conveying thought, but by awakening emotion, this passage, 12:1-7, is an example. It does not and perhaps was not intended to express definite ideas. It almost defies interpretation; and yet every one, even the unlearned, feels its peculiar power. Its phrases are the world's favorite expressions to describe man's decay and death. Its very mysteriousness fits it better to express our thoughts at the approach of the greatest of mysteries. If we could understand it, it would mean less to us.

Thus we can trace the inner life of Koheleth; what his outward life was is less important. In his soul the maxim, "Fear God and keep His commandments," shone like the Eddystone light, above the waves of vice and ambition, through the mists of doubt, unextinguished by the fierce blasts of pessimism, obscured, but not quenched; shaken, but not destroyed; and as the tempest died away, beamed in clear splendor over the billows to cheer and guide.

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## THE JEWISH LITERATURE OF NEW TESTAMENT TIMES: HOW SHOULD IT BE STUDIED?

We have seen that it would be in several ways useful to the student of the New Testament to know accurately the conditions of Jewish life and thought at the time of Christ. We have now to observe that this knowledge can be gained only by a *critical* and *discriminating* use of the sources at hand. Reasonable and even self-evident though this requirement seem, it has been so often disregarded, and is indeed so difficult of fulfillment in the case before us, that it deserves a careful consideration.

At two points criticism and discrimination are both difficult and indispensable;—in deciding to what writings preference shall be given, and in the treatment to which they are afterwards subjected.

I. It is evidently essential for our purpose to have writings that are *representative* in character, and do not contain merely individual opinions, or the vagaries of an insignificant sect; and further, we require such as are representative of *pre-Christian* Judaism, and if they are later in date than Christianity, they must at least be independent of its influence or approximately so. This brings us at once to the central and most difficult question in regard to the sources; the question of preference between the pseudepigraphic writings on the one hand, and the rabbinical on the other. The Pseudepigraphs meet the condition as to time better, for many of them were certainly written before Christ. But the Talmud, it has